







# STUDIES

IN  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

A Charism for Dialog

*Advice from the Early Jesuit Missionaries in Our World  
of Religious Pluralism*

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.

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The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

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## A CHARISM FOR DIALOG

*Advice from the Early Jesuit Missionaries  
in Our World of Religious Pluralism*

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*Francis X. Clooney, S.J.*

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## *Of all things . . .*

**Good News!** This summer Fr. Richard Blake, S.J., will become editor of STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS and chairman of the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality. A member of the New York Province, Fr. Blake is currently a professor of Fine Arts and director of the Film Studies program at Boston College. He has had previous publishing experience as executive editor of *America*, for which he has been doing film reviews since 1975. He knows the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality well from having been a member of it during the years 1998–2001, and has been the author of two essays in STUDIES, the first in March 2000, entitled “Listen with Your Eyes,” and the second in the January issue of this year, “City of the Living God: The Urban Roots of the Spiritual Exercises.” I could not be more pleased that the members of the Jesuit Conference Board, the United States provincials, have chosen so capable a colleague—and a friend to boot—to take on the leadership of STUDIES and of the Seminar. I think you will be equally happy with him and with how the Seminar will flourish under his guidance.

Dick will continue to reside at Boston College and carry out his faculty responsibilities there. The Seminar will probably continue to be peripatetic in its meetings, enjoying the hospitality of many of the Jesuit communities around the country. The Institute of Jesuit Sources here in St. Louis will, as before, carry out the printing and distribution of STUDIES. I will remain director of the IJS.

In the next issue of STUDIES, I shall say a little more about my sixteen years as chairman of the seminar and editor of eighty issues of STUDIES. Until then, and after that too, please welcome Dick Blake as your new chairman and editor!

Let me turn to something frivolous now, a set of verses called “The King’s English” that appeared on a web page, <[www.sodamail.com](http://www.sodamail.com)>, and that was republished in *Celebration* for June 2001. Amusing they are, but when an editor has to deal with the words therein (pity the newly named editor of STUDIES) he may wish that Esperanto had become the national language.

I take it you already know  
    Of tough and bough and cough and dough?  
Others may stumble, but not you,  
    On hiccough, through, slough and thorough.  
Beware of heard, a dreadful word  
    That looks like beard and sounds like bird.  
And dead: It’s said like bed, not bead—  
    For goodness sake don’t call it deed!  
Watch out for meat and great and threat . . .  
    They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.  
A moth is not the moth in mother,  
    Nor both in bother, nor broth in brother.  
And here is not a match for there,  
    Nor dear or fear for bear or pear,

And then there's dose and rose and lose,  
Just look them up—and goose and choose.  
And cork and work and card and ward,  
And font and front and word and sword.  
And do and go, then thwart and cart.  
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!  
A dreadful language? Why sakes alive!  
I learned to talk it when I was five.  
And yet to write it, the more I tried,  
I hadn't learned it at fifty-five.

Of many good books, I could say many good words, but space usually allows just one book for comment. This time it is *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy* (Catholic University of America Press, 2002, pp.ix +197) by José M. Sanchez, a professor of history at Saint Louis University. In the midst of the tangle of prejudicial, special-pleading, contentious, exculpatory, and defamatory works on the role of Pope Pius XII vis-à-vis the Holocaust, it is refreshing to come across a book that tries to be evenhanded and fair minded about a subject that in itself is equally tangled.

To turn to another subject, in all the printed and spoken comments on the present sex scandals among priests in the United States church and in all the calls for changes of one kind or another, two remarks stand out. The first of them puts the possibility of change, whether one agrees with any of them or not, in perspective. The second illustrates how absurd and out of touch with reality some remarks can be. The first comment: The *Wall Street Journal* of March 26, 2002, advises us to remember that the Catholic Church is precisely that, a universal or global church, so that "it is salutary to recall that the United States accounts for paltry 6% of the world's Catholics" and that "when the Roman Catholic Church debates key issues, it has to take account of their global picture." The second comment is reportedly by Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the official press spokesman of the Holy See, to the effect that the ordination of homosexual or gay men could well be invalid. To say the least—and a lot more could be said—there is no theological, canonical, historical, psychological or physiological precedent or rationale for such a statement. Or to put it more vividly, as a Jesuit friend not at all given to hyperbole did, "If that is really what Navarro-Valls said, his head should be served up on a platter; and if he was just floating a trial balloon for someone else in a Vatican corridor, the platter should hold two heads." I agree.

*John W. Padberg, S.J.  
Editor*

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so-called “world religions” are now also “American religions.” New immigrants of diverse religious backgrounds are arriving in great numbers, particularly from Asia and the Mideast; people of Christian and Jewish backgrounds are converting to other religions; these other religions are influencing the thinking and spirituality even of Americans who remain Christian and Catholic. Native Americans are retrieving a stronger sense of their own religious identities and returning publicly to traditional rites and beliefs, while other Americans are showing great interest in Native American spirituality. The United States is perhaps the most religiously diverse country on earth, a land where almost all living religions have found a home and can grow and flourish. Pluralism as the simple fact of religious diversity, but also as the cultural and religious climate in which diversity subtly changes the way we think about every religious topic, deeply affects how we act. This is especially so as we come to see that our ministries will increasingly reach beyond the limits of Christian and Catholic communities, and as we come to recognize that people of other faiths can be among our closest collaborators.

The moment is exciting, but it is not as simple as I have just presented it, for there is more to our identities. We are also still companions of Jesus, disciples on his path; and so we also need to proclaim the Gospel, even in a situation where interreligious conversation must be a distinctive feature of our ministries. We need to do two things at once: to proclaim the Gospel and to re-imagine our religious identities in a context of dialog. Yes, dialog is the way of the future; but no, it ought not be separated from mission. Even as we immerse ourselves in our pluralistic society, we need also to keep asking how we are to be companions of Jesus, on mission, in our twenty-first-century culture. The dilemma is aptly captured by the congregation when it insists (though without fully explaining how it is possible) that dialog and proclamation go together:

[W]e are committed to both the proclamation of the Gospel and interreligious dialog: Dialog reaches out to the mystery of God active in others. Proclamation makes known God’s mystery as it has been manifested to us in Christ. Our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions helps us to discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and wider horizons of God’s salvific presence in the world. . . . Interreligious dialog and proclamation of the Gospel are not contrary ministries, as if one could replace the other. Both are aspects of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. . . . Our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions helps us to discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and wider horizons of God’s salvific presence in the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GC 34, *Our Mission and Inter-Religious Dialogue*, no. 7.

Openness but also faithful conviction, wider encounters but also deeper faith, learning but also proclamation, finding God in diversity but also seeing the world through explicitly Christian eyes. Can we keep both sets of values alive in our ministries?

This question has confronted me with something of a personal dilemma too. Over the years, I have found the exploration of different religious traditions to be an enriching opportunity, but also a challenge to my Christian identity. Early in my Jesuit life, I decided to travel beyond the boundaries of familiar Christian culture and community by going for regency to Nepal, where I taught in a traditional Buddhist and Hindu culture, and learned much more than I taught. After ordination, I followed up on the experience by working for a Ph.D. in Indian Studies and committing myself to serious research on Hindu religious traditions; I had occasion to travel to India a number of times for longer and shorter periods of study and exploration. Personally, I have been immensely enriched by all this. The more I have learned, the more interesting I have found the Hindu traditions to be, and the more I have benefited from contact with Hindu people, their ideas and images, texts and practices. I have learned much, spiritually I have been helped much. Intellectually I have found very little of significance that I disagree with in specific ways. I am currently beginning to write a book on what we can learn from the classical theologies of Hindu goddesses, and see still wider vistas opening before me.

Yet I have also found a gap between this positive and enriching experience—in a way, my particular vocation—and the expectation, rooted in Christian faith and in the Jesuit tradition of missionary endeavor, that whatever their virtues, people still need to know Jesus Christ and receive the Good News. Not that I have doubted this, but only that I've had little to say about it. In principle, I readily agree that proclaiming the Gospel is intrinsic to our Christian and Jesuit identities, and I do not believe that this command can be compromised or indefinitely postponed because of one's appreciation of the positive values of interreligious learning and dialog. To be a Jesuit, even a Jesuit scholar of other religions, should still entail a sense of Christian mission. It would make little sense to imagine myself a new kind of Jesuit, silent, not engaged in proclaiming the Gospel, having nothing much to say about Jesus in this world of pluralism.

Proclaim the Gospel, then—yes; but, still, while reflecting on the religions of India, I have not seen more clearly what precisely “they”—Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, people of all the different faiths—are lacking and we are to give them. How does the faith-claim “It is supremely good for all people to know Jesus Christ” translate into a claim with at least some arguable content and empirical support? How might one make a plausible



case that particular people in particular religious traditions which flourish in America today are lacking God's full presence in their lives, are on the wrong track, suffering the ill consequences of deficient spiritual paths, and so forth? All religious traditions are open to some criticism, but it is much harder to imagine criticisms sufficiently sweeping that they might persuade people to leave their own religion and join another. As Catholics, we are accustomed to distinguishing flaws and problems in the Church from its essential goodness and value; it is difficult, then, not to extend the same courtesy to people of other faiths. That leaves us wondering how our increasingly positive appreciation of religious traditions is to be integrated with a commitment to an ongoing proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

## In Search of an Original Charism for Dialog

I suggest that we—the Society, myself, possibly many of my readers—are therefore in a bit of a quandary if we acknowledge two values, interreligious encounter and the proclamation of the Gospel, and if we also refuse to escape the quandary by merely asserting in grand terms that dialog and proclamation belong together. Our problem is a very contemporary one, yet it is not entirely new; and so I also suggest that we look back to our roots to seek guidance in the present moment. This essay stems from my conviction that as we seek balance in the present situation, we do well to pay renewed attention to Jesuit origins, in search of what I will be calling the “Jesuit charism for dialog” as revealed to us in the work and writings of the “early Jesuit missionary scholars,” that is, those missionaries from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries who left for us extensive writings as records of their cross-cultural learning and interpretation of it. My guess is that just as the Society has profited greatly by a retrieval of the basic Ignatian charism in the Exercises and Constitutions, today we can also profitably reflect on the insights, experiments, opinions, and hopes of the missionary scholars, reading the signs of our times in light of theirs.

In the following pages I attempt to sketch a bit of what we can learn by reflecting on what those early Jesuits thought and wrote. Although I know more about the Indian context, I deliberately try to explore the global context, attempting to notice patterns in the work of Jesuits around

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<sup>2</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, S.J. “In Ten Thousand Places, in Every Blade of Grass: Uneventful but True Confessions about Finding God in India, and Here Too,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 28, no. 3 (May, 1996), for further reflection on my own experience of encountering God in other traditions and how this changed my sense of Christian identity.

the world. I am not a historian, and on the nuances and details I gladly defer to the experts among my readers. Yet all of us must think like historians, in the sense that we need to be sensitive to historical difference and acknowledge that many of our words and concepts—“religion,” “culture,” “comparative study”—were not much used in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, nor could our ways of asking questions and posing problems be familiar to them. My hope is that I can make some worthwhile observations without getting too technical, sticking as much as possible to the common-sense terminology we are comfortable with today. Much more will still have to be said about the overall work of the early Jesuits outside Europe and about that work in the context of the still-wider work of the Church throughout the world, as we continue to try to figure out our mission in today’s world. But this essay is a start.<sup>3</sup> Some readers may find my essay too full of long quotations; but I have indulged in this luxury because I hope my readers will take the time to ponder for themselves what the missionaries had to say. Since almost all the texts I cite are available in English translation (as noted in the bibliography), I hope too that some will be motivated to seek out those sources and put my very select quotations back into their richer contexts.

The basic story is well known. From the earliest days of the Society and Francis Xavier’s 1542 journey to the East, Jesuits were involved in cross-cultural encounters, finding themselves in enormously demanding situations involving arduous travel, perilous adventures, physical risk, and strenuous intellectual challenge. While their companions in Europe were opening schools, preaching erudite sermons, and engaged in Reformation debates, farther afield Jesuits were at the forefront of encounter with new peoples speaking unfamiliar languages, living according to very different social and cultural traditions, and adhering to largely unfamiliar religions. Most of us know at least a little about key figures such as we will meet in the pages to follow: Francis Xavier (India and east Asia, mid-sixteenth century), José

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the essays in John O’Malley, S.J., Gauvin Bailey, Steven Harris, T. Frank Kennedy, S.J., *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). I have for the most part omitted reference to other important and relevant areas for research: the relationship between Jews and Jesuits—a special case, I believe, in the realm of interreligious relations; the importance of the experience of Ignatius and other early Jesuits growing up in a Spain with a long history and strong memories of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim interactions; the effect of Reformation debates and apologetics on the Jesuit attitude toward other religions; the different but still important work of Jesuit missionaries and scholars in the Society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; comparison of the Jesuit charism for dialog with other charisms, e.g., the Dominican and Franciscan, or the eighteenth-century Lutheran missionaries to south India; the reactions of people of other faith traditions to Jesuits.

Acosta (Peru, late sixteenth century), Alessandro Valignano (India and east Asia, late sixteenth century), Matteo Ricci (China, late sixteenth century), Jerome Xavier (north India, sixteenth to seventeenth centuries), Nicolas Trigault (China, early seventeenth century), Roberto de Nobili (south India, early seventeenth century), Jerónimo Lobo (Ethiopia, mid-seventeenth century), Jean de Brébeuf (Canada, mid-seventeenth century), Alexandre de Rhodes (Vietnam, mid-seventeenth century), Joseph Lafitau (Canada, early eighteenth century), and Ippolito Desideri (Tibet, early eighteenth century). These missionary scholars carefully observed and meticulously described the people they encountered and the places they visited, recast the nature of Christian mission, and thus helped shape modern Europe's idea of the world, and even affected, to some extent, how people in other places view themselves.<sup>4</sup> They helped shape the view of culture and religion and interreligious exchange to which we are heirs.

Although it is not easy to summarize their views, some features stand out prominently. First, cultures and traditions, no matter how distant, are never entirely alien or unintelligible; all traditions and cultures share a common origin in God's creative plan and continue to be touched by divine

providence; second, most of what one encounters in Asia and the Americas and throughout the world is good because it is from God; third, reason functions and communicates successfully across all linguistic and cultural divides; fourth, the Trinitarian God is present and at work in the texts, symbols, and actions of various cultures and religions, and can (by grace) be recognized in them; fifth, the actual religions of the world are deficient, distortions of the true and the good, and

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*From the earliest days of the Society and Francis Xavier's 1542 journey to the East, Jesuits were involved in cross-cultural encounters.*

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possess only fragments of the truths and values fully possessed by the Roman Church; sixth, while sin and demonic influence are possible, the major root of false religion is ignorance, which can be overcome by an education that includes reasoned argument and the correction of errors; seventh, it is possible and worthwhile to argue about religious matters, since

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<sup>4</sup> See Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), for a vivid example of the rethinking of Chinese religious identity in light of Jesuit scholarly retrievals of the Confucian past.

the triumph of truth is to the intellectual and spiritual benefit of those corrected in debate.

Distances in time and space make it unlikely that their ideas and values can be imported directly into our ministries today—we shall see important, necessary differences; but as we reflect carefully on what they can teach us, we should be able to make more-informed choices about how closely to follow in their footsteps, and when to walk off on our own. I begin with Francis Xavier, that paradigmatic missionary who inspired all those who followed him, and then move on to trace out various interesting and useful threads constituting this Jesuit missionary history.

## Learning to Be Open: Francis Xavier's Insight

To begin to understand Xavier, I look simply at one letter he wrote from India in 1544 to Ignatius and his companions in Rome. What interests me is how he combined utterly firm convictions, zealous ambitions, energetic labor, and moments of openness and innovation, all in a tightly defined project aimed at bringing Christ to Asia and Asians to conversion. He was confident and vigorous enough in his teaching and work of conversion that barriers of language and expectation did not hinder him:

Since they did not understand me nor I them, their native language being Malabar and mine Basque, I assembled those who were more knowledgeable and sought out individuals who understood both our language and theirs. After they had helped me with great toil for many days, we translated the prayers from Latin into Malabar, beginning with the Sign of the Cross, confessing that there are three persons in one sole God, then the Creed, the Commandments, the Our Father, Hail Mary, Salve Regina, and the Confiteor. After I had translated these into their language and had learned them by heart, I went through the entire village with a bell in my hand in order to assemble all the boys and men that I could. After they had been brought together, I taught them twice a day. Within the space of a month, I taught them the prayers and ordered the boys to teach their fathers and mothers and all those of their house and their neighbors what they had learned at school.

He was clearly an educator who very much wanted his students to learn a better way on the basis of good, clear instruction, but he was not against the destruction of pagan artifacts and places of worship as stark reminders and warnings:

I hope in God our Lord that the boys will be better men than their fathers, since they manifest much love and affection for our law and for learning and teaching the prayers. They have such a great abhorrence for the idola-

tries of the pagans that they frequently quarrel with them; they reproach their fathers and mothers when they see them worshiping idols, and they denounce them by coming to tell me about it. When they tell me about idolatries that are being practiced outside the villages, I collect all the boys of the village and go with them to the place where the idols have been erected; and the devil is more dishonored by the boys whom I take there than he was honored by their fathers and relatives when they made and worshiped them, for the boys take the idols and smash them to bits. They then spit upon them and trample them under their feet; and after this they do other things which, though it is better not to mention them by name, are a credit to the boys who do them against one so impudent as to have himself worshiped by their fathers.<sup>5</sup>

Xavier coupled his disrespect for Hindu images and places of worship with contempt for what he considered the false pretenses of Brahmins, the leaders of Indian religious society. In his view they were “the most perverse people in the world,” “people that never speak the truth—always thinking on how they can cunningly lie and deceive the poor, the simple, and the ignorant . . . [themselves] men of little learning, and what they lack in virtue, they have much more in malice and iniquity.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike some later Jesuits, he was initially inclined not to enter into conversation with Brahmins, convinced that such dialog would lead nowhere.

The story might have ended there, with a well-intentioned preacher sorely lacking in respect for the religious practices and structures he encountered. There surely have been Jesuits with that attitude since Xavier’s time. Yet, as he reports in the same letter, Xavier also glimpsed a basis for a further conversation when he met a relatively learned Brahmin who began to tell Xavier what Brahmins really believe:

[For financial reasons] they would never say that there is only one God, Creator of heaven and earth, who is in the heavens; and that he should adore this God and not the idols, who are demons. They have some

<sup>5</sup> Francis Xavier, S.J., 1506–1552, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, trans. and intro. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 64–66. Other examples of a rather violent response to what is not Christian are available. For example, a Fr. Mauduit, who worked in south India at the beginning of the eighteenth century, describes in a 1701 letter his deliberate disruption of the silence of a Hindu temple (where he stayed as a guest) by the loud singing of Christian hymns, and thereafter his smashing onto the ground the household shrine of a Brahmin who had taken him in as a guest, giving as his justification that he found the images offensive (*The Travels of the Jesuits into the Various Parts of the World Extracted from Their Letters to the Jesuits of France*, 2 vols. [1743], 1:423–26). No other information is given about Fr. Mauduit in these volumes.

<sup>6</sup> F. Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 69 f.

writings in which they preserve their commandments. The language used for teaching in their schools is like the Latin used in ours. He recited their commandments for me very well, giving a good explanation to each one of them. Those who are wise observe Sundays, something that is quite incredible. On Sundays they say no other prayer than the following, which they repeatedly recite, "Om Sri Narayanaya Namah," which means, "I adore thee, God, with your grace and assistance for ever";<sup>7</sup> and they recite this prayer very gently and softly in order to keep the oath they have taken. He told me that the natural law keeps them from having many wives; and that in their writings it is stated that a time will come when all are to live under one law. This Brahmin further told me that many incarnations are taught in those schools.

Unexpectedly, what may be the first instance of "Jesuits in interreligious dialog" has taken place, and Xavier learns something new, to see Indians and their beliefs in a slightly more nuanced light. Knowledge of the one God, creator of heaven and earth, though a knowledge hidden lest the revenues of idolatry dry up; commandments; observance of the Sabbath and Sabbath prayers; the natural law and monogamy. All of this made sense. Suddenly India appeared a more interesting and complex religious world, and Xavier seemed to recognize dimensions of Indian life that could not be written off as idolatrous or demonic or worthy only of eradication—even if, in his view, such insights were still mixed with superstition. After further discussion, though, the conversation between Xavier and the Brahmin ended in a kind of standoff:

He asked me to make him a secret Christian, but under certain conditions, which, since they were neither licit nor honest, I refused to grant. I hope in God that he will become one without any of them. I told him to teach the simple people that they should adore only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who is in the heavens. But he, because of the oath which he had taken, did not wish to do this, since he feared that the demons might kill him.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Xavier reported, other Brahmins he spoke with eventually acknowledged the truth of his positions and confessed that "the God of the Christians is the true God, since his Commandments are so completely conformed to natural reason." Yet they too refused to convert, due to the pressure of public opinion.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes dialog leads nowhere, or at least not where the missionary might hope.

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<sup>7</sup> Or better, "OM, praise to you, holy Narayana."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 71.

Nonetheless, an intellectual door was opened for Xavier; and to pass through it, he had to continue learning and adapting, more complexly than at first. The letter as a whole only hints at his developing mind-set, for his journey had just begun. As he made his way east to Japan and then toward China, he began to understand complex spiritual potential in people whose beliefs and practices could no longer be dismissed as demonic and replaced wholesale with imported Christian truths. Only several generations later, Roberto de Nobili, writing from the scene of his own experiments in adaptation in south India, would reverently recall the exemplary transformation Xavier had undergone and the effect it had on the missionaries to follow him:

Neither did our holy father Francis Xavier hesitate to copy the same usage when he saw that the glory of God demanded it. Thus, in Japan he removed his customary humble dress and assumed robes of silk and various ornaments. Indeed, the religious of our Order who followed in his footsteps on the China Mission and are engaged in the task of winning over souls for Christ our Lord always appear in public dressed in silken garments, wearing a long beard, their fingernails and hair well trimmed, and holding a fan of honor in their hand.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in both his absolute certainties and moments of openness, Xavier remains always the zealous missionary—even to his home audience. The letter itself was an instrument of persuasion, for he was inviting his readers to collaborate in his ongoing project. Early in the letter he makes this none-too-subtle appeal:

Many fail to become Christians in these regions because they have no one who is concerned with such pious and holy matters. Many times I am seized with the thought of going to the schools in your lands and of crying out there, like a man who has lost his mind, and especially at the University of Paris, telling those in the Sorbonne who have a greater regard for learning than desire to prepare themselves to produce fruit with it: "How many souls fail to go to glory and go instead to hell through their neglect!" And thus, as they make progress in their studies, if they would study the accounting which God our Lord will demand of them and of the talent which has been given to them, many of them would be greatly moved and, taking means and making spiritual exercises to know the will of God within their soul, they would say, conforming themselves to it rather than

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<sup>10</sup> Roberto de Nobili, S.J. (1577–1656), "Report on Indian Customs," in *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J.*, trans. and annot. Anand Amaladass, S.J. and Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 178 f.

to their own inclinations: “Lord, here I am! What would you have me do? Send me wherever you will, and if need be, even to the Indies!”<sup>11</sup>

By discernment, Xavier hoped, scholars back in Europe would become vulnerable to a divine will that would draw them beyond the world of ideas into the world of action, where the command to proclaim the Gospel would become the determinative force in their lives. Spiritually transformed, they would in turn become agents of a similar transformation in the people they would meet in India and elsewhere in the East. Near the end of the letter, Xavier even more explicitly invited his readers to come to India and join the adventure, moving from a safely theoretical understanding of the Gospel to one that comes alive in the field:

Oh, if those who pursue knowledge employed the same great efforts in helping themselves to relish these consolations, how many toils would they endure by day and night in order that they might know them! Oh, if those joys which a student seeks in understanding what he is studying he should [instead] seek to find in assisting his neighbors to appreciate what is necessary for them so that they may know and serve God, with how much greater consolation and readiness would they prepare themselves for the accounting which they must give when Christ bids them: “Give an account of your stewardship!” (Luke 16:2)

To know in the midst of experience, to rejoice more in teaching than in learning, to discover consolation in action and not just in receptivity—and to discover all this in India, China, Japan, beyond the realm of a comfortable Christendom: such is not a bad ideal even for today. Although we must make numerous adjustments in presuppositions, rhetoric, and application in order to make Xavier’s invitation apt for twenty-first-century America, the shift from theorizing and spectatorship to participation in a world of religious diversity—as a companion of Jesus—is a shift that is in principle highly relevant even today. We need to work out the challenges of dialog and proclamation right

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*We need to work out the challenges of dialog and proclamation right in the meeting point of many religious traditions in today’s society, and not from the safe distance of cautious spectators.*

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<sup>11</sup> F. Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 67 f. In a footnote the editor refers to an observation by Henri Henriquez, another of the very early Jesuits in India, that St. Thomas the Apostle had prayed, “Send me where you will, but not to the Indies!” Peter Canisius is reported to have said, “Lord, send me where you will, even to the Indies!”



in the meeting point of many religious traditions in today's society, and not from the safe distance of cautious spectators.

Xavier mixed extreme self-confidence, horror at things Hindu, contempt for India's learned class, willingness to tolerate violence against religious symbols, with a sudden, incompletely fulfilled opening to dialog. Today we cannot tolerate the destruction of others' religious symbols, nor can we despise their learning and practices, regardless of how strongly we feel about the truths we hold and the deficiencies of the pluralistic culture we observe. Like Xavier, we must learn to engage our culture with sufficient urgency that it can intrigue, surprise, frustrate, annoy, and charm us, as we make ourselves vulnerable in order to communicate the Gospel in the shifting words and images of a twenty-first-century religious universe. We cannot literally embrace Xavier's practice as our starting point or conclusion; but we can weave into our reflection on American culture a similarly intense combination of missionary spirit, fierce practical judgments, and a willingness to be caught up into unexpected moments of dialog and learning, despite our settled and dearly defended opinions about what is right and true. We need to hold and promote our views of what is morally and spiritually good for people, and we need to be able to condemn abuses of human rights, violations of social justice, and dangers to spiritual well-being; but still, we must also leave the door open to the possibility that we have not yet mastered fully what it means to be human, to live truly, rightly, justly.

## The World Is a Reasonable Place

Much of the history of Jesuit missionary scholarship can be imagined as working out the implications of the experiments Xavier was undertaking in those first days, as he and then his successors came to reflect on the marvel that God was already present among the people they were determined to connect with God's saving grace.

If, as Xavier found, non-Christian peoples were not entirely bereft of God's wisdom and inklings of revealed truth, the cause of this knowledge had to be explained, and later generations spent a good deal of time reflecting on the matter. There were numerous theories early on among the missionary scholars. For example, Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, writing in Peru in the mid-seventeenth century, thought that since God would not have overlooked the Americas for fifteen hundred years, and since among the twelve apostles St. Thomas was known for his mission to the "most

abject people in the world, blacks and Indians," it was only reasonable to conclude that St. Thomas had preached throughout the Americas:

He began in Brazil—either reaching it by natural means on Roman ships, which some maintain were in communication with America from the coast of Africa, or else, as may be thought closer to the truth, being transported there by God miraculously. He passed to Paraguay, and from there to the Peruvians.

Ruiz de Montoya reported that St. Thomas even predicted the arrival of later missionaries, including the Jesuits themselves:

[Thomas] had prophesied in the eastern Indies that his preaching of the gospel would be revived, saying: "When the sea reaches this rock, by divine ordinance white men will come from far-off lands to preach the doctrine that I am now teaching you and to revive the memory of it." Similarly, the saint prophesied in nearly identical words the coming of the Society's members into the regions of Paraguay about which I speak: "You will forget what I preach to you, but when priests who are my successors come carrying crosses as I do, then you will hear once more the same doctrine that I am teaching you."<sup>12</sup>

Joseph Lafitau, who wrote the masterful and ground-breaking *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times* (1720) after spending some years in French Canada, was skeptical of Ruiz de Montoya's theory, observing that it lacked convincing historical evidence. But he himself somewhat curiously introduced another kind of material hint at the coming of Christ, by explaining that the cross is to be seen everywhere in the world:

It would seem that one can infer that, in the first times, in the revelation made to our ancestors of a Redeemer, the manner of the redemption was also revealed to them; the cross which was the symbol of eternal life, being the instrument used by the Redeemer to open to us the doors of a happy eternity. . . . Among the Chinese, the cross is found today among their hieroglyphic letters as [it was] in ancient times among the Egyptians. For it is both the symbol of perfection and also it represents the numeral ten. That [fact] brings to my attention that, in the ancient Roman numerology, the numeral ten is represented by Saint Andrew's cross. The cross is also in

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<sup>12</sup> Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, S.J. (1585–1652), *The Spiritual Conquest: A Personal Account of the Founding and Early Years of the Jesuit Paraguay Reductions* (1639), trans. C. J. McNaspy, S.J., John P. Leonard, S.J., and Martin E. Palmer, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993), 79–81. Ruiz de Montoya was born in Lima, Peru, and entered the novitiate in 1606. His colorful career involved numerous adventures in defense of the native people in Paraguay; late in life he wrote the vivid account that became the *Spiritual Conquest*.



the Mexican hieroglyphs in the center of a character which stands for the highest and most perfect of all their ciphers. . . . Father d'Avril in his *Travels*, speaking of the high priest of the Tartars, who is like a sort of divinity on earth for whom all the orientals have an extreme veneration, says a very singular thing. "What is most remarkable," he adds, "is that he bears the name of *Lama*, which in Tartar means the *cross*, and the Bodgoi who conquered China in 1644 and submitted to the Dalai Lama in religious matters have always on them crosses which they call *lamas* for which they have quite an extraordinary respect."

These remarkable signs, providentially present everywhere in the world, quietly and implicitly prepare people for the coming of Christ.

Lafitau also proposed, more conceptually, that there was an ideal religion in the beginning. Like many of his contemporaries, he thought that the Bible testifies to God's original instruction of the first human beings; what God taught them was later on temporarily obscured because of sin and a gradual decline in human culture. Nonetheless, even in the darkest of circumstances inklings of that original religion survive, albeit often only in a faint and distorted form.

This religion, pure in its beginning, suffered great alterations in the course of time, fixed epochs of which it is difficult to mark. Ignorance and passion caused in it a confusion which intermingled everything, either in the object of religion, or its forms of worship, or its goal. The concept of God became obscured. . . . The worship of God was corrupted in the same way by superstition and the wicked inclinations of the heart which sanctified, so to speak, even vices, and, in place of the felicity which God had proposed to man for his final goal, man, gross and carnal, made one for himself in conformity with his desires and the ill regulation of his appetites, guided by his senses and imagination.

While this theory of fall and decline was in a way rather gloomy, it was actually intended to suggest positively that reversal is possible, since a restoration of original and enduring values is a reachable goal. Cultures are redeemable, because they have within them at least remnants of God's original plan. Even in the darkest times, intimations of the truth remain:

[W]hatever alteration has taken place in this religion, the concept of God was not effaced in such a way that no trace of it remained; for, in whatever errors idolatry has plunged the Gentiles, they are not so abandoned to their idols as to have lost the knowledge of a true and unique God, the author of all things.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Lafitau, S.J. (1681–1746), *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, trans. W. N. Fenton and E. L. Moore (1720), 1:97–99.

By this logic, when missionaries proclaim the Gospel they are reminding people of what they had known in the beginning and never completely forgotten.

In his mid-seventeenth-century *Voyage to Abyssinia*, Jerónimo Lobo wrote about the Christian communities of Ethiopia (Abyssinia). In the course of that account, he had occasion to describe surrounding pagan tribesmen and to make some judgments about their religious capacities. For example, in describing the pagan Galla herdsmen, he managed, albeit grudgingly, to see even among them some evidence of a proper belief in God:

They did not settle in any of the provinces they occupied, but used them only for grazing their cattle, from which they gain their livelihood in the manner of African Bedouin herdsmen. They are great horsemen. Every eight years, they choose a king. They neither sow nor cultivate the land. They subsist on meat and milk. They adore no idols, but have superstitious practices, acknowledging that there is a superior being above, which they call Oac, meaning either Heaven or God, so confused is the idea they have of their creator or so dimmed is the light of reason in them because of their barbarous state.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most important among the earliest Jesuit missionary writings were *On Achieving the Salvation of the Indies* (1576) and *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590) of José Acosta, who worked in Peru in the late sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Even today these are recognized as pioneering contributions to our knowledge of the Americas and to the development of cultural anthropology. Much of Acosta's anthropological research and analysis presumed an intellectual and theological confidence

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*In some instances, the Jesuit admiration for the people and culture they encountered goes much farther, toward actual esteem for a culture and its traditions.*

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The Institute of Jesuit Sources will soon publish a new study of Lafitau by Carl F. Starkloff, S.J.: *Common Testimony: Ethnology and Theology in the Customs of Joseph Lafitau*.

<sup>14</sup> Jerónimo Lobo, S.J. (1595–1678), *The Itinerário of Jerónimo Lobo*, trans. Donald M. Lockhart. (ca. 1640, first published in French, 1728; London: The Hakluyt Society, 1984), 159.

<sup>15</sup> See Claudio Burgaleta, S.J. *José de Acosta, S.J. (1540–1600)* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1999).



about the unity and intelligibility of human experience and culture everywhere in the world. Though missionaries bring the Gospel with them, it is never entirely foreign, since God is already present:

First, although the darkness of infidelity holds these nations in blindness, yet in many things the light of truth and reason works somewhat in them. And they commonly acknowledge a supreme lord and author of all things, which they of Peru called Viracocha, and gave him names of great excellence, as Pachacamac, or Pachayachachic, which is the creator of heaven and earth; and Vsapu, which is “admirable,” and other like names. Him they did worship, as the chief of all, whom they did honor in beholding the heavens. The like we see among them in Mexico and China, and all other infidels. This accords well with that which is said by St. Paul, in the Acts of the Apostles, where he did see the inscription of an altar, *Ignoto Deo*—to the unknown God. . . . It is therefore a truth, conformable to reason, that there is a sovereign lord and king of heaven, whom the Gentiles, with all their infidelities and idolatries, have not denied, as we see in the philosophy of *Timaeus* in Plato, in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, and in the *Asklepio* of Trismagistus, as also in the poetry of Homer and Virgil.

When preaching builds on that natural and original foundation, it is intelligible even in the most distant lands, so that “the preachers of the Gospel have no great difficulty planning and persuading [their hearers to accept] this truth of a supreme God, be the nations to whom they preach ever so barbarous and brutish.” Acosta confessed that

it remains very difficult to persuade people to take the next step, to admit that acknowledging the supreme God logically entails dismissing the idea of other gods, even as subordinate deities with delegated powers. Nonetheless, he exhorted his readers, one must keep trying to teach people

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*What must our world be like so that the Gospel truth should and can be understood?*

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to break their bad religious habits and live according to the deeper instincts about God already implicit in their awareness.<sup>16</sup>

In some instances, the Jesuit admiration for the people and culture they encountered goes much farther, toward actual esteem for a culture and its traditions. China is perhaps the best instance of this, as it is well known how greatly Matteo Ricci and other early Jesuits respected what they discovered in China. In his 1615 introduction to Ricci’s diary, Nicolas

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<sup>16</sup> José Acosta, S.J. (1540–1600), *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, trans. Edward Grimston (1604), ed. Clements Markham (1880) (New York: Lennox Hill Publishing and Distribution [Burt Franklin] 1970), sect. V.3, pp. 302f.

Trigault gave a comprehensive overview of China as the Jesuits assessed it in the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup> His account reflects their high esteem for the Chinese:

Of all the pagan sects known to Europe, I know of no people who fell into fewer errors in the early ages of their antiquity than did the Chinese. From the very beginning of their history, it is recorded in their writings that they recognized and worshiped one supreme being whom they called the King of Heaven, or designated by some other name indicating his rule over heaven and earth. It would appear that the ancient Chinese considered heaven and earth to be animated things and that their common soul was worshiped as a supreme deity. As subject to this spirit, they also worshiped the different spirits of the mountains and rivers, and of the four corners of the earth. They also taught that the light of reason came from heaven and that the dictates of reason should be hearkened to in every human action. Nowhere do we read that the Chinese created monsters of vice out of this supreme being or from his ministering deities, such as the Romans, the Greeks, and the Egyptians evolved into gods or patrons of the vices.

The oneness of God is recognized; reason is esteemed and serves as the basis for moral action; vice and depravity are widely and successfully rejected throughout China. The Chinese are, therefore, uniquely ready for God's merciful intervention, which will perfect their natural inclinations and fulfill the best instincts of their consciences.

Trigault next expresses a remarkably generous hope that many Chinese had already found salvation:

One can confidently hope that in the mercy of God many of the ancient Chinese found salvation in the natural law, assisted as they must have been by that special help which, as the theologians teach, is denied to no one who does what he can toward salvation, according to the light of his conscience.

This Scholastic principle is buttressed with a historical and cultural judgment:

That they endeavored to do this is readily determined from their history of more than four thousand years, which really is a record of good deeds done on behalf of their country and for the common good. The same conclusion might also be drawn from the books of rare wisdom of their ancient

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<sup>17</sup> The diary was published in a multi-volume edition. See Nicolas Trigault, S.J. (1577-1628), "The Expedition to China Undertaken by the Society of Jesus," in *The Expedition to China*. This has been translated in *The China That Was* (Bruce Publishing Company, 1942).



philosophers. These books are still extant and are filled with most salutary advice on training men to be virtuous. In this particular respect, they seem to be quite the equals of our own most distinguished philosophers.<sup>18</sup>

Proclaiming the Gospel in China entailed bringing a new value and new truth to the culture, but this required, first of all, a respect for what was already long established among the Chinese. One can add something new only by understanding and affirming what is already in place—a maxim well worth remembering in the twenty-first century too.

Meditations on the visit of St. Thomas to the Americas and conjectures regarding the pervasive presence of the cross everywhere in the world were ways of imagining the continuity and harmony of a world that needed the Gospel, waited for it, and was capable of receiving it. Theories about innate intuitions of the unity of God and about original natural religion enabled the missionary scholars to explain how it was that native peoples around the world could be trusted to accept the Gospel and connect it with what was best in their traditions. Basic values are continually reaffirmed: the light of truth and reason; the conviction, conformable to reason, that there is a sovereign lord and king of heaven, whom the Gentiles, despite all their infidelities and idolatries, have not denied; pure, original religion; intimations of the one God “from the books of rare wisdom of their ancient philosophers.” Granted that much of this vocabulary sounds peculiar in a post-Enlightenment and postmodern world and that the boundary between “what is naturally good” and “what is truly revealed” is easily blurred and hard to demarcate, nonetheless, there is great value in the insistence of these Jesuits that goodness preceded them but they had still more to offer.

In twenty-first-century America many of us share the component elements held in tension here—respect for other people as sharing with us a common humanity; confidence in our own faith as qualitatively different from theirs; perhaps, too, a desire to add something new to the goodness already present in their lives. By comparison with the early Jesuits, however, for the most part we lack such aids as historical memories (visits of St. Thomas to America) or material signs (the cross mystically present in every culture) or even a convincing rhetoric (“there was one original religion”) by which to make plausible a view that people in other faith traditions are good and yet also in need of our message. Our claims can sound hollow and not interestingly Christian, as we finally either simply esteem others as nice people, or claim in an easy, *a priori* fashion that people of other traditions will somehow be better off by embracing the truth we offer. So today we

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<sup>18</sup> Trigault, “Expedition to China,” 154 f.

have to dig deeper again, as the early Jesuits had to do: What must our world be like so that the Gospel truth should and can be understood?

## Native Morals, Good and Bad

The Jesuit exploration of unfamiliar cultures and religions was not aimed simply at proper ideas and theories, since the missionary scholars had a great concern for morality and strong views about basic virtues and vices, taken to be universal, and moral norms binding humans everywhere. These missionary scholars were quite studious in their description of the customs of the people they met, even when they nearly despaired of finding something worthy of praise.

In his *Voyage to Abyssinia*, Jerónimo Lobo meticulously described modes of dress, food, money, legal customs (particularly regarding marriage and divorce) among the Ethiopians. In evaluating what he learned, he wove together close attention to what was either familiar or strange to him with a confident judgment that the Ethiopian Christians (to whom true religion had been brought first by the Queen of Sheba, who had visited Solomon in 1 Kings, and later by the eunuch converted by Philip in Acts) nonetheless were still burdened with a syncretist mix of pagan, Jewish, and Muslim beliefs and customs, and suffered because of it.<sup>19</sup> After describing the nearby Galla tribesmen (as cited above), Lobo recorded that their affliction of the Christian community was predicted by the first Catholic patriarch of Ethiopia, who, upon receiving ill treatment from the Emperor and the local Christians, had a vision in which he saw black ants plaguing the land. It turns out that the ants were the Galla:

By the multitude of these creatures he meant the great number that were to come; and by the color, the very dark color of these barbarians who possess and destroy the greater and best part of this empire, which Muslims and pagans [Gallas] kept diminishing on all sides. . . . [These encroachments left the Christian empire] surrounded on all sides, in the midst of so much paganism, like the seed of the Gospel that they still preserve, although mingled with an infinite tangle of weeds of Jewish and Muhammedan errors and countless heresies, amid thorns that smother it so much. As it appears, the devil added to this abandoned Christianity and ensnared the poor Abyssinians with all the errors he had sown throughout the world from the beginning of the Church until the present time.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lobo, *Itinerário*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 160.

Errors old and new, pagan, Jewish, and Muslim, plus the energies of the devil, combine to prevent the Ethiopians from recognizing the superior truth announced by the Church in Rome.

Jean de Brébeuf, writing from French Canada in the seventeenth century, was more intelligently attentive to detail and sought to learn by carefully examining people's beliefs and practices. He was fascinated by the morality of the Hurons, whom he found it necessary both to criticize and admire:

I find in their marriage customs two things that greatly please me; the first, that they have only one wife; the second, that they do not marry their relatives in a direct or collateral line, however distant they may be. There is, on the other hand, sufficient to censure, were it only the frequent changes the men make of their wives, and the women of their husbands.

He went on to report their generosity, their belief in the corporeality of the soul and their neutrality regarding whether it survives death, and their fascination with visions and dreams. Brébeuf was mildly appreciative: "We see shining among them some rather noble moral virtues . . . a great love and union, which they are careful to cultivate by means of their marriages, of their presents, of their feasts, and of their frequent visits." He noted that the Hurons were extremely generous, even to strangers, and that in two matters less lascivious than Christians, many of whom should "blush some day in their presence":

You will see no kissing nor immodest caressing; and in marriage a man will remain two or three years apart from his wife, while she is nursing. They are gluttons, even to disgorging; it is true, that does not happen often, but only in some superstitious feasts—these, however, they do not attend willingly. Besides, they endure hunger much better than we—so well that after having fasted two or three entire days you will see them still paddling, carrying loads, singing, laughing, bantering, as if they had dined well. They are very lazy, are liars, thieves, pertinacious beggars. Some consider them vindictive; but, in my opinion, this vice is more noticeable elsewhere than here.

Thereafter, and in words that are resonant with the hope for the conversion and transformation of the sinner that one finds in the Spiritual Exercises, Brébeuf discerned a good basis among the Hurons on which lives of Christian virtue could be built. His prayer at first took a standard biblical and somewhat militant tone, that by the grace of God they would change their superstitions "into true Religion, and, like spoils carried off from the enemy, consecrate them to the honor of our Lord, and profit by them for their special advantage." Then he went on to express a more specific hope

based on their already admirable gift of hospitality, as one more stranger approaches them:

We also have hope that our Lord will give at last the light of his knowledge, and will communicate the fire of his graces, to this Nation, which he seems to have disposed thereto by the practice of this noble virtue [of hospitality]. They never close the door upon a Stranger, and, once having received him into their houses, they share with him the best they have; they never send him away, and, when he goes away of his own accord, he repays them with a simple "thank you."

This makes me hope that, if once it pleases God to illumine them, they will respond perfectly to the grace and inspiration of his Son. And, since he has come as a Stranger into his own house, I promise myself that these good people will receive him at all hours into their hearts without making him wait too long on account of their hardness, without withholding from him anything in the whole range of their affections, without betraying him or driving him outside by any serious fault, and without claiming anything in his service other than his honor and glory; which is all the fidelity one can ask in a soul for the good use and holy employment of the favors of Heaven.

It is on such dispositions and foundations that we hope, with the grace of God, to build the edifice of the Christian Religion among these people, who, besides, are already affectionately inclined toward us and have a great opinion of us. It is now our part to correspond to our vocation, and to the voice of our Savior, who says to us, "I tell you, lift your eyes, see how the fields are already ripe for harvest."<sup>21</sup>

Brébeuf's basic preferences were not controversial: fidelity in marriage, self-control, a preference for the spiritual over the material, generosity even to strangers. His desire to pay attention in order to sort out what is good and bad, so as to discern where people were most ready for the coming of Christ, was an intelligent stance we can still appreciate. Today, however, it is difficult to accept either his negative or his positive judgments uncritically, for we cannot so readily be in the position of judging what is and isn't admirable in other peoples' traditions. It is very difficult to make universally persuasive ethical judgments, or judgments that are not in some way derived from established religious principles that themselves are not in fact universally accepted. It is also difficult to persuade people who do not share our religious views that we are not merely pleading the case of our

<sup>21</sup> The citations are from Jean de Brébeuf, S.J., Letter to Father Le Jeune, May 27, 1635, in vol. 8 of *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents 1610-1791*, trans. William Lonc, S.J., and George Topp, S.J., 125-29. (See the on-line version at [http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations\\_08.html](http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html)). The scriptural verse is from John 4:35.



own familiar values, defending our moral behavior by claiming that it is universally acceptable. Were we to update Brébeuf's reflection on the Hurons, for instance, we would first need to hear from native Americans how they view their behavior and how seeming vices and seeming virtues fit together in the moral universe as they construct it. Perhaps it was simply the style of the times, but almost never do these early missionary accounts allow people of other religions and cultures to speak for themselves.

Nonetheless, Brébeuf guides us by his way of combining moral judgment with moral particularity. He carefully acknowledged, as best he could, how people seemed already open to God's illumination, with or without further correction by Jesuits. He seems to have made no sweeping judgments, but to have nuanced his position by innumerable smaller assessments. We are accordingly invited to observe carefully, to become intimately familiar with the people around us, to be ready to judge ourselves in the mirror of their virtues, and to find ways to connect how people already live and love and build community with the greater hopes we have for God's further visits to their homes in search of hospitality.

## Educating for the Truth

The missionary scholars, of course, never intended merely to stand by as cultural spectators, simply watching as God achieved the salvation of the people to whom they were sent; rather, they believed that God had chosen to work through their words and actions. They shared the more general Jesuit confidence that people could be improved through education and would thereby profit religiously as well. Alessandro Valignano, the Society's visitor for Asia in the latter part of the sixteenth century, was one of the most influential figures in designing the Jesuit approach to mission.<sup>22</sup> In the preface to his catechism (intended as a model for other such works by Jesuits in China and Japan), Valignano expressed the presupposition that all people are capable of reasoning and open to persuasion. Unlike animals, preoccupied with survival, "humans, beyond the living and sensing which God gives them for their own benefit, also have a certain force and faculty which is by far more excellent, which they call mind and intellect, by which they investigate the truth of things by reasons and arguments, and recognize

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<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Valignano's deliberations, see Josef F. Schütte, S.J., *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, trans. John J. Coyne (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980).

what is decent and base, etc.”<sup>23</sup> Capable of reasoning as they are, humans can be held to a high standard of rationality and to reason’s moral and spiritual implications, and their failures must be honestly noted and pointed out to them:

Truth is the appropriate object of the mind and intellect, since reason is a kind of light by which we perceive the evidence of what is true and by which we can decide whether what is said is true or false. In this matter there is a great contest between the truth placed in reason and the human intelligence; what reason can demonstrate as false, the intellect cannot judge to be true. Reason may show something to be base and evil, but the intellect is still able not to follow the decent and good. Thus humans often fall, embracing the false instead of the true, so that they are turned about and wander, since the false appears to them as the true.

Education is therefore possible and necessary:

The task then is to ensure that they not be deceived, but keep their minds intent and vigilant, so as to sort out the differences among things under the guidance of reason. Then, led by reason, they will be able to decide, in the light of the true light, whether something said is true or false, whether something that happens is good or evil. Thus natural reason is able to teach what is true and show what is good, that these should be embraced and held on to. It also indicates what is false and evil, so that they can condemn and reject it.

Catechesis, such as Valignano intended to exemplify in the body of his *Catechism*, facilitates by clear instruction the rectification of mind and heart:

We will therefore discourse in this little work about truth and the rightness of laws. That we may know what is the true and right and worthy law which is to be chosen and observed by all, we should follow reason as our leader. Illumined with the help of this light we will see what is true and the law for right living, and similarly what is false, empty, and deceptive.

Proper reasoning guides one in living the good moral life, and faulty reasoning encourages depravity. This is a strongly rationalist interpretation of the foundations of morality, but it has its uses. It affords a religious reason for valuing education, as good in itself and as propaedeutic to spiritual advancement. Academic study is not necessary to a proper disposition toward the Christian way, because common sense, intelligent catechesis, and even “pre-catechesis” quite often suffice perfectly well. But any serious

<sup>23</sup> All citations of Valignano are from the preface to his Latin *Catechism* (1586); the translation is my own.



education, honestly rational and open to spiritual values, prepares people to confront the truth of their own existence as understood in terms of God's larger plan, and accordingly to change their way of life. If one can educate a person, that person is more likely to become open to God's plan.

In the missionaries' view of things, proper educational theory requires that different people be approached differently, and it seems that they spent a good deal of time figuring out how to educate the people they met, be it simple villagers or courtly diplomats and priests. José Acosta most influentially categorized three different kinds of pagans—the literate and civilized, illiterate but civilized, illiterate and uncivilized—and recommended different educational approaches toward each. The Japanese and Chinese (literate and civilized), for instance, are to be treated with great respect and drawn into courteous conversation. The Incas (illiterate but civilized), who have fallen into abuses, are to be corrected forcibly when they stray, though in general trusted to run their own societies. Tribal groups (illiterate and uncivilized), sometimes like wild beasts and other times like small children, "are to be coerced by power and

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*Educate students properly, professionally, and in the long run they will more likely be open to God's plan for their lives.*

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honest force, lest they impede the Gospel. They are to be held under authority; removed from the forests and transferred to cities and a human life. It is expedient in a way to compel them, though unwilling, to enter the kingdom" (*Luke 14:20*).<sup>24</sup> While Acosta calmly calculated how much force could be applied to unwilling natives—a calculation we ought not to accept—his goal was nonetheless simply to teach people in the way they are most likely to learn. For this, of course, we must know the people to whom we speak, lest our efforts to communicate, which have been effective in other contexts, turn out to be irrelevant among the people with whom we actually live now. Our own education is then in question: if we are to respond differently to different religious and ethnic groups, we need to know them well, understanding as best we can their views of the world and ways of shaping their lives.

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<sup>24</sup> José Acosta presents this threefold categorization in the preface to his *De procuranda Indorum salute* (On achieving the salvation of the Indies) in Latin and Spanish (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984), 60–68; the cited text is from 67 f.

Roberto de Nobili, living deep in south India in the first half of the seventeenth century, agreed with Acosta that different classes of people would best be dealt with differently, in keeping with the social norms accepted among Brahmins, the people he most wanted to win over to his philosophical and religious views. He also stressed that, in India at least, force is not useful, and that gentle instruction patiently administered, is the norm:

I take this opportunity to remark on the opinion of certain zealous men who disapprove of our manner of preaching the Gospel to the pagans and who accuse us of being too indulgent, too reserved, not preaching in the manner of the apostles—that instead we are having recourse to political ruses and a worldly prudence. It seems that they mean that we should, right from the start, attack the temples and the superstitious beliefs of these people. I respect their zeal, but I believe that they fool themselves, and experience fully convinces me of this. To attack prejudices frontally would arouse hatred and persecution, close their spirits to the truth, stirring up their passions and provoking their opinionatedness.

He cited the historian Metaphrastes on the method of St. Thomas the Apostle in order to justify his own accommodating and nonintrusive style of cultural adaptation and conversation:

Seeing that the cult of demons exercised its empire over these people and that it was deeply rooted in their spirits, the holy apostle did not press his attack and refute these errors, he did not have recourse to severe reprimands, he did not seek in rigor a remedy for this evil. He knew that it is difficult to destroy impressions and ideas that habit has at length strengthened and, so to speak, even identified with our souls; gentle persuasion is more able than violence to change them.

Consequently, de Nobili went on to say,

[w]hen we wish to chase the darkness from a room we do not waste time in making a taper in order to expel it little by little, but we light a torch and the darkness dissipates itself. So too with regard to the pagans: penetrate their hearts and win their esteem and affection. So carry the torch of truth, and all the shadows of idolatry will dissipate without difficulty.<sup>25</sup>

While it would be wrong to say that de Nobili no longer felt the urgency which inspired Xavier to reach zealously to catch souls before they were lost, in fact de Nobili's approach—illustrated in his decision to opt for the long-term good, living for years a simple and ascetic Indian lifestyle, studying the Hindu classics, engaging individual Brahmins in conversation, as

<sup>25</sup> From a letter to his cousin, Constantia, duchess of Sora, December 6, 1606; for a fuller citation, see de Nobili, *Preaching Wisdom*, 7 f. and further references.

if ambitioning to convert India one person at a time, beginning with the most influential—legitimated a slow and patient illumination of minds over a long period of time. Education works, even if the results are not seen immediately. This principle seems intact in most Jesuit educational enterprises today, in India as well as the West: educate students properly, professionally, and in the long run they will more likely be open to God's plan for their lives.

Alexandre de Rhodes, writing in the mid-seventeenth century in Vietnam, calculated more delicately still how the teaching of the truths of reason and of the higher truths of faith are to be coordinated, as this passage from his *History of the Kingdom of Tunquin* indicates:

I am in perfect agreement with others that we must not expound to the pagans whom we wish to convert the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, the incarnation and the passion of the Son of God, and sow the holy seed of these great truths in their hearts before we have uprooted the errors and superstition of idolatry. Nevertheless, I do not believe that we should wait until the time of baptism to propose to the catechumens the faith in the Trinity of the divine Persons. On the contrary, we must begin with an exposition of this mystery, and then it will be easier to go from there to the incarnation of the Son of God, who is the Second Person, and to what he has suffered to save the world lost by sin, and to his resurrection and other mysteries of our religion. After all, this is the order and method followed by the apostles in the symbol of the faith which they have left us.<sup>26</sup>

In his Vietnamese language *Catechism*, at the pivotal shift between the fourth and fifth “days” of the eight-day catechetical program, Rhodes fine-tuned his approach, indicating the necessity of moral conversion and the rejection of traditional religious beliefs and practices before the teaching of the higher truths of the faith can begin:

What follows [regarding the sacred mysteries of the faith] should not be expounded to all, but only to those who, having heard what has been said above, have already despised idols and false religions and are prepared to receive baptism by fasting and other works of piety. At this stage, they may be given our Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles' Creed to learn by heart.<sup>27</sup>

One cannot program learning according to a tight schedule, and its inner dynamic must be respected. Yet, too, learning is not an end in itself, since

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes [1593–1660] and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 1998), 126–28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 260.

the point of opening the mind is to release the heart, so as to guide the liberated person deeper into the mysteries of the faith.

We know that the Jesuits in Europe became famous for their schools, built in response to complex contextual factors urgent in seventeenth-century Europe. Even if early on one does not see mission schools and colleges in large numbers in the Americas and Asia, the missionary scholars and administrators nonetheless adopted attitudes similar to those of their colleagues in Europe. Education, undertaken in a properly integral spiritual context, not only allows but also requires one to know the student, taking into account the student's capacities and already developed intellectual and moral capacities, so as to build efficiently on such foundations. Cultures are good and reason is an efficient tool; and the missionaries saw themselves as the schoolmasters of culture and faith, educating people to recognize the mysteries of God already implicit in their lives.

It is not possible for us merely to embrace their wisdom and choices, as if we might accomplish anything by repeating the points made in the preceding paragraphs as a charter for twenty-first-century Jesuit ministries in education in pluralistic societies. We cannot merely opine that education in Jesuit high schools and colleges in the United States somehow and mysteriously makes students more Christian. We probably cannot identify kinds of people according to kinds of culture and religion in order to determine set responses in kind; perhaps our complex pluralistic society entails religious opportunities and problems that cannot be dealt with in established high schools and colleges or by neat categories. But we can profit from reflection on the confidence of the missionary scholars in the religious significance of education, their pragmatic assessment of situations in which they found themselves, their search for opportunities to converse intelligently with the people they met, their willingness to be flexible enough to respond differently to different needs. To be skilled educators of minds and hearts in a world where the words and images and ideas of many religions meet is a very high goal to which we can legitimately aspire in the century to come.

## Arguing the Faith

For the early Jesuits in the missions, but certainly, too, back in Reformation Europe, argument was a key part of the educative process; wrong views must be dragged into the light and shown up for what they are, critiqued and stripped of the appearances of logic and reasonability, just as reasons have to be adduced to defend the truth and dismiss unworthy



attacks upon it. So, too, in the realm of religion, there could be no virtue in imagining a merely irenic encounter with people of other religious traditions in which all views are accepted without criticism.

Accordingly, these missionary scholars were vigorous in apologetics, and did not hesitate to criticize directly the religions they encountered. Valignano included in his *Catechism* a withering critique of basic Buddhist beliefs and practices. Even Matteo Ricci, justly famous for his respect for Chinese culture and immersion in China's intellectual traditions, could quickly dismiss Buddhism as not only not worthwhile but also as very harmful:

CHINESE SCHOLAR: Is there nothing to be gained from venerating the image of the Buddha and reciting Buddhist scriptures?

JESUIT SCHOLAR: Why stop at "There is nothing to be gained"? The fact is that activities such as these are of great harm to the orthodox Way. The more one indulges in this type of heterodox worship and veneration, the more serious will be one's crime.<sup>28</sup>

Ricci's esteem for traditional Chinese learning and wisdom was in part defined in terms of a considered hostility toward the Buddhist tradition, portrayed as an alien teaching that arrived from India and did little good for the Chinese. One ought not be polite in the face of error.

In his *Dialog on Eternal Life*, de Nobili sharply dismissed as foolish the worship and complex myths of the great Hindu deities Visnu and Siva. His call for patience and gentleness (cited above) notwithstanding, he was quite ready to assert that Hindu beliefs made no sense and were self-contradictory. Distinctively pagan beliefs, no matter how firmly espoused and piously practiced, are inherently confused, have no redeeming intellectual or moral value, and are not worthy of respect by Christians.

Jacobo Fenicio, an elder contemporary of de Nobili also living in India, was the author of the *Livro da seita dos índios orientais*, one of the most erudite early European treatises on the beliefs of Hindus. It was also a thoroughly polemical work. In it the author developed, for instance, an elaborate argument demonstrating that while the Christian veneration of images was perfectly reasonable and spiritually profitable, the apparently similar Hindu worship of images was entirely different, and was justly considered repugnant to reason and proper religious sensibilities. Christian veneration is by grace able to engage divine realities adequately, while Hindu

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<sup>28</sup> Matteo Ricci, S.J. (1552–1610), *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J., ed. Edward J. Malatesta, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 391.

worship trades in vanity and falsehood, demeaning both the divine and the human.

A final example pushes the matter further, in a way that is uncomfortable in light of today's sensitivities. While today we rightly wish to cultivate harmony among Christians and Muslims, there was no hesitation among Jesuits in the Mughal court of the emperor Akbar in sixteenth-century India when it came to criticizing Islam fiercely. The aim of Jerome Xavier and his companions was to persuade Akbar to consider the Gospel and, they hoped, to convert.

A step in this direction was to show that it makes no sense to think of Islam as a religion instituted by God. In attempting to demonstrate this, Jerome Xavier proposed an argument about the logic of religious change: first, if God directly prompts new religious developments, then what comes later must be better, since God would introduce changes only for the better, as occurred, for example, in the transition from the Old Testament to the New. Second, if God did intend further developments, he would also have made it clear that the earlier religion was not final or perfect, and he would have given hints about what is to come, just as he had adumbrated the coming of Christ in the testimonies of the prophets of Israel. Accordingly,

if Mohammed appeared to the world as a prophet with a new law and doctrine that should abolish all the commandments of God, then it was reasonable that he should teach more spiritual things about God, that he should command things more sublime, based more upon reason and directed towards a great reform of life. Moreover, as the laws that succeeded each other were more perfect, so those who proclaimed them should be men of a more perfect life and more directly guided by God by means of miracles, as can be observed with Moses in comparison with Abraham and with Christ our Lord in comparison with Moses; and if Mohammed proclaimed a law of God that was more perfect than the Gospel, he in his own person should have been a more perfect man and more qualified in virtues and miracles.

If Muslims cannot show in the course of debate that Mohammed's life and teachings are in important ways superior to those of Jesus, it makes no sense to imagine that God would have bothered to send Mohammed after Jesus. Since (from Jerome Xavier's point of view) there is no evidence of superiority, one cannot plausibly assert that it was God who sent Moham-

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*Provided our judgments are open to revision and critique, little is gained by altogether ruling out arguments among religious people.*

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med. So too, had God intended to make a new revelation through Mohammed, "there should have been one who in advance should have informed the world that the Gospel of Christ had to cease to exist by the coming of Mohammed and his law." But there were no such prophetic indications, so it is most reasonable to assume that God had no intention of supplanting the Gospel with the message of Mohammed.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, there is no reason for intelligent people to follow Islam. So much for Islam! Such an argument is uncomfortably confrontative and unpleasant in today's world. Especially in the abbreviated form given here, it seems facile, too sweeping a judgment on a complex religious tradition, and a judgment based on too narrow a set of ideas about how God should act.

Today we can legitimately criticize the kind of religious argumentation practiced by Ricci, de Nobili, Fenicio, Jerome Xavier, and other missionary scholars, and we can submit their conclusions to similarly rigorous critiques. We can wonder whether they knew enough in those early days of the study of religions and cultures to have their facts straight and put those facts in their proper context, and whether they were willing to show the same sympathy for the multi-layered nature of religious belief within other religions as they did for the complexities and oddities of Roman Catholic thought. We may also doubt whether there was a sufficient atmosphere of trust and respect that could make debate profitable. While learning works best as a two-way process, our missionary scholars, though personally humble, gave little evidence of any awareness that Roman Catholicism might be open to criticism; instead, they left the impression that they had nothing to learn.

Nevertheless, the principles involved continue to have some force: reason is an invaluable cross-cultural means of communication; logic counts in religious matters; if we are committed to taking seriously what others believe, and if we assess those beliefs seriously with respect to features we find more or less attractive, we cannot suspend all judgments. Provided our judgments are open to revision and critique, little is gained by altogether ruling out arguments among religious people. Even if we must for the most part simply admire the riches and depth of other people's religious beliefs and practices, we do no one a favor by deciding in advance to esteem equally everything we discover or to leave logic aside when discussing religious matters. The price of deciding never to argue in the course of interreligious dialog might also eventually entail a decision not to think about such

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<sup>29</sup> Jerome Xavier, S.J., "Fuente de vida," in *Jerome Xavier, S.J. [1549–1617], and the Muslims of the Mogul Empire*, by Arnulf Camps (*Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire*, 1957), 124 f.

religious matters and, consequently, a further decision not even to think seriously about the truths we confess in the Creed.

If we do decide to argue, we will, of course, be unlikely to begin with the fine points of metaphysics or the details of the import of biblical prophecies or the logic of divine action. Our contemporary concern has shifted toward issues such as human rights, the equality of men and women, the environment, cooperative action for the betterment of the world and society. But even if we start with such ethical issues, we will eventually still have to uncover and critique the worldviews underlying such practices, and give reasons why one worldview is preferable to another; and then we find ourselves again in the midst of more theoretical arguments where the plausibility and cogency of any philosophical and religious beliefs—our own included—become a major concern.

In the end, the challenge before us is to decide on a practical basis whether interreligious argument can be useful in an environment where bad feeling, misunderstanding, and violence are rife, and where mutual respect and harmony are precious commodities. Certainly, Valignano's principle still applies:

Nothing that will be said here should injure anyone or harm anyone by offense. It will be said only with the intention that everyone should understand the difference between the true and the false. For we care for this one thing carefully, and we strive with great effort, that all may strive to embrace the true and the right law of all life and hold to that norm of living which will rightly lead them, saved, to that most desirable of goals, eternal life.<sup>30</sup>

To argue religiously and usefully and charitably all at once is exceedingly difficult. But much is at stake, and that may be what people really expect of Jesuits, even today.

## A Mysticism of the Triune God Present Everywhere in the World

It is perhaps typically Jesuit that these missionary scholars were rationalist in their conviction about the power of incisive argument, yet also mystical in their conviction that God was already at work before they came—and, for those who believed in St. Thomas's earlier visit, even before the apostle came. They were not exclusively rhetoricians or schoolmasters or anthropologists or historians of religion, but also mystics who repeatedly

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<sup>30</sup> From the preface to Valignano's *Catechism*.

discovered God at work in the curious new places to which they were sent. Steeped in Ignatius's mystical vision, they were predisposed to see the Trinity present—dimly luminous, partially concealed—in all things, including cultures, texts and rites, social practices. Consider the following testimonies.

In the same context where he discussed the visit of St. Thomas to the Americas, Ruiz de Montoya indicated how the apostle explained to the natives the Trinitarian mystery in their world:

From his teaching and instruction, there has survived to our own time a knowledge of the hidden mystery of the Holy Trinity—even though, through the loss of recollection, they used to celebrate in Peru a major feast of this mystery in a superstitious fashion. They had three statues of the sun, named Apointi, Churinti, and Intiqua or Qui, meaning Father and Lord Sun, Son of the Sun, and Brother of the Sun. That the saint explained to them the unity of these three divine Persons is witnessed to by an idol that they called Tangatanga, in which they worshiped this three-in-one and one-in-three.<sup>31</sup>

In discussing several verses of the ancient Indian wisdom text known as the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Roberto de Nobili recollected the European Christian beliefs about a primal revelation made known to both Moses and the Greeks; accordingly he could comment as follows on what he found in the *Upanishad*:

But, what is yet more surprising, I discover in these verses even an adumbration of the recondite mystery of the most Holy Trinity, the most gracious and most high God who without a doubt vouchsafes even to these far-distant lands some inkling of the most hidden secret of our faith through the teaching of some sage living among these people, in much the same way as by a rather mysterious inspiration he deigned to illuminate the Sybils, Trismagistus, and certain other masters of human wisdom in our part of the globe. The text runs as follows: "That very person within is in his nature spirit; in him is one who is likewise spirit, existing through an act of the will; he who exists through the mouth (i.e., the Word), is held close to that person's breast (i.e., as son)—that person is at the same time Lord and cause of things."<sup>32</sup>

By an exegesis too complex to rehearse here, de Nobili interprets the words of the *Upanisad* as symbolically indicating the divine reality de Nobili knew to be present in every wisdom text of every culture: there is a divine Person, creator of all things, who wills the coming forth of a divine Spirit, and from

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<sup>31</sup> De Montoya, *Spiritual Conquest*, 79–81.

<sup>32</sup> De Nobili, *Preaching Wisdom*, 101f. This translation is from de Nobili's Latin, which is in turn only an approximate translation of *Taittiriya Upanishad* 1.6.1.

whose mouth comes his Word.<sup>33</sup> This insight helped vindicate his insistence that Indian wisdom ought to be taken seriously.

Finally, when Ippolito Desideri traveled to Tibet in the early eighteenth century, he was astounded to discover that Tibetan culture was not entirely foreign to him, but remarkably similar to his own, even in important religious dimensions:

There is a great resemblance in the Tibetan section and religion to the mysteries of our holy Faith, to the ceremonies, institutions, ecclesiastical hierarchy, the maxims and moral principles of our holy Law, and the rules and teachings of Christian perfection.

Most remarkably,

although the three complex objects of adoration—the primary saints, the books, and laws given by them to the world, and the faithful observers of those laws—are absolutely different from the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet if you consider the principal attributes of the three divine Persons, and the qualities recognized by the Tibetans in the said three complex objects, a doubt may easily arise whether the trinity of the latter may not be an obscure symbol or fabulous legend of the true, august, and divine Trinity.<sup>34</sup>

The Christian God—specifically in the mystery of the Trinity—is really, perceptibly, present in different religious traditions. As those traditions are known more deeply and exactly, differences are noticed, but they do not detract from a deeper, objective similarity based on the foundation of all religions in the mystery of the Triune Christian God.

It is attractive to imagine these missionary scholars ascending a kind of mental ladder: the murkiness of first encounters and initial judgments about shocking ignorance, illiteracy, immorality, civil disorder; subsequent glimpses, and then the discovery of more complete patterns of intelligibility in the lives and beliefs of the people they met; notice of intolerable vices, but also of striking and admirable instances of virtue; a deepening conviction that people are well disposed for improvement through education and argument; an underlying and all-encompassing confidence in the marvelous presence and activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a trust that God is working through the missionaries themselves.

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<sup>33</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, S.J. "Religious Memory and the Pluralism of Readings: Reflections on Roberto de Nobili and the *Taittiriya Upanishad*," *Sophia* 34, no. 1 (1995).

<sup>34</sup> Ippolito Desideri, S.J. (1684–1733), *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia, 1712–1727*, ed. Filippo de Filippi (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1937), 301.

People in other faith-traditions are not likely to be enthralled by the notion that we find the Trinity indwelling within their lives, and we must resist settling for the lazy and self-satisfying claim that “they are really worshiping our God.” But we can still affirm the truth that the Triune God indwells all things and works among all people, and so the example of the early missionary scholars should stimulate us to make that belief concrete, alive, and evident in the lovingly perceived details of the beliefs and practices of different traditions. God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—dwells lovingly in those details. To affirm this in turn requires that we pay attention and thoroughly learn the beliefs and practices of those traditions, so that (for us at least) there is substance to the claim that God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is at work in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other great and small traditions.

Currently we lack a worldview and historical perspective, a vocabulary and grammar of spiritual insight rich enough to make such claims concretely and plausibly; and so once again our mystical dispositions must take a scholarly turn: with what words and images do Americans think and speak and enact the divine; by what religions, what spiritual paths can we learn to think and speak the languages of our culture? Such are the difficult questions that the missionary scholars would have understood; they would have encouraged us to keep asking until things have clarified enough that we can actually see God where we are.

## A Charism for Dialog—and Finding a Right Balance with Proclamation

In the introduction to this essay, I reflected on American pluralism, the congregation’s call to dialog balanced with mission, and my own experience. I suggested that we—if I may now include the reader in my dilemma—lack a full integral response to religious pluralism which would allow us to reverence the goodness and depth of other religious traditions and God’s work in them, while yet also remaining faithful to our identities and mission as companions of Jesus. We tend to be too benignly and vaguely open-minded, or too serenely assured of the superiority of our own faith, as if openness and conviction are options between which we must choose.

As the premise for this particular essay—a small contribution to our reflection on the array of issues involved—I began by guessing that we can learn from the “charism for dialog” of the early Jesuits and, accordingly, I explored that charism in the preceding pages. By now, I hope, we have learned something on a variety of topics: zeal, curiosity, inquiry, useful

theorizing aimed at practical conclusions, persistence in conversation, a willingness to step beyond the boundaries of one's own cultural context, persistent confidence in the ability of people to move from ignorance to understanding, a conviction that God may be glimpsed in each concrete situation, however unfamiliar it may be at first. The wisdom of our spiritual ancestors helps us to be better neighbors to people of other faiths, better scholars, better Christians and companions of Jesus, better able to bridge cultural chasms and translate unfamiliar ways of speaking, to facilitate dialog and serve as a new kind of religious educators in a new kind of American society. Although I continue at present to research the Hindu-goddess traditions, I do so mindful of the long tradition of Jesuit learning to which I must also remain faithful.

To appropriate their virtues honestly, however, we need also to notice honestly what today at least must be characterized as vices: rudeness, fixed and judgmental attitudes seemingly impervious to real change, excessive rationalism, overly confident and speedy assertions about largely unfamiliar cultures, the reduction of traditions to errors perceived in them, a scarcity of appeals to experience, an inclination to speak and form judgments rather than to listen and learn, an inability to appreciate religiously other ways of viewing the world, a seeming lack of the awareness (such as the Dominican Bartolomeo de Las Casas had) of the systemic evils inherent in the violent

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*By what religions, what spiritual paths can we learn to think and speak the languages of our culture?*

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colonialism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or of imperfections and inadequacies in the Roman Catholic view of the world. Much in their ways of thinking and acting is dated and not to be replicated in the twenty-first century. That this should be so a few hundred years later should be no surprise and no insult to their memory. We must always stand in awe of how much they achieved so long ago and in such difficult circumstances, yet we need also to be resolute and discerning and tough-minded, just as they were, even as we study them.

We need, then, to continue reflecting on the legacy of the Jesuit missionary tradition, sorting out what is of use and inspiration to us today. Most important of all, we need to keep together the elements they kept together: accommodation and evangelical zeal, certainty and openness, interreligious learning and Christian mission. What is to be balanced seems not to have changed much; how it is to be balanced may have changed a great deal.



Much of their creative imagination and zeal for improvisation was instigated by their desire to find ways to proclaim the Gospel; their learning was instrumental to the proclamation of the Gospel. As Wilhelm Halbfass succinctly puts it,

[T]he achievements of the missionaries comprise a very important chapter in the history of the Western encounter with Indian thought, a chapter that is exemplary from a hermeneutical standpoint and which, moreover, has also had historical consequences. . . . In spite of or, perhaps, precisely because of their “prejudice” and dogmatic limitations, they have also helped to define and clarify the central problems involved in approaching and understanding that which is alien: they, or at least their outstanding exponents, embody a desire to understand those whose singular power and problematic nature arise from their deep and uncompromising *desire to be understood*.<sup>35</sup>

It is likely that we—many of us at least—will have to calculate the balance differently. Dialog, mutual learning, and cooperation are key in our age, and for us proclaiming the Gospel may serve as a kind of holy instigation to go forth and cross boundaries, meeting our “others,” and finding ways of translating our beliefs and values into their languages. Were we to lack a sense of mission and of our mandate to proclaim the Gospel, we could easily become too comfortable, nestled within the boundaries of communities made up of people already like ourselves.

If the missionary scholars saw dialog primarily as an instrument of proclaiming the Gospel, and if we see mission as primarily the instigation to meet and enter into conversation with other people, then we are both taking dialog and proclamation seriously, holding on to the core tension of the Jesuit tradition of missionary scholarship: learning *and* proclamation, mission *and* dialog. The danger inherent in the early tradition was the subordination of all that prodigious, magnificent scholarship, such that it would never be allowed really to affect how the Jesuits saw their work, nor to allow them to admit explicitly that their understanding of the Christian faith was transformed by the encounters they experienced. The danger inherent in our current way of proceeding is that learning and conversation become ends in

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<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 53. See also my essay, “Understanding in Order to Be Understood, Misunderstanding in Order to Preach: The Underside of Missionary Learning,” awaiting publication in *Wilhelm Halbfass Appreciation Volume*, ed. Karin Preisendanz (Vienna: Institut für Indologie). In it I point out the insistence of the early Jesuit missionary scholars that they had to find something deeply wrong in each culture and religion, a kind of spiritual surd, so as to justify proclaiming the Gospel and to counterbalance their wider appreciation of what they found.

themselves, respect and openness are regarded as virtues so unquestioned that we forget that we still, always, have a Gospel to proclaim. If the first Jesuit missionary scholars needed to see their learning as more than instrumental and to integrate it more deeply into their Christian identities, our need today is to revitalize the tension, lest dialog smother proclamation, lest the Gospel be left in the hands of those who know little about the religions of our brothers and sisters in American society today.

Just as each missionary had to figure out how to apply his principles in his local situation, often on his own, learning customs and languages as best he could, so too ourselves: once we admit the need for a balance that both maintains and deepens the paradox of dialog and proclamation of the Gospel, we need to do the hard work of making it come alive in concrete local situations that we have learned to understand and interpret. We need to pay attention, sort things out, learn the language and customs of the overlapping communities in today's America, and then venture our best guesses as to how to witness to Christ without diluting our commitment to interreligious learning.

Nothing in the Jesuit missionary heritage prepares us adequately for the new pluralism and new challenges of a country like the United States in a time like ours. Nothing I've recorded in the preceding pages explains fully how I am to integrate my own study of the Hindu traditions with a persistent sense of Christian commitment and Christian mission. They operated by scholarly standards quite different from those common today, and in any case cannot fairly be expected to offer answers to questions they never asked. If we merely repeat their insights—God is present in creation, all humans are reasonable, pagan morality can be edifying, people can be educated, argument is worthwhile—we will imitate that great past but not bring it to life in this present moment that God has given, not to Xavier, Acosta, Ricci and the others, but to us. But if we ignore their testimonies, or honor them only by a nod in their direction, we may do worse—we surely can—or share only their stubbornness and self-confidence without the benefits of their wisdom and struggle for new words in the face of new ideas. Their charism is a real gift to us, for us to receive—but also to reshape and give again—in American culture today.

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Editor:

The collection of essays in the November 2001 issue of STUDIES, "How Multicultural Are We?" is a commendable source for the beginning of a collective examination of conscience on how we all help to "create the conditions for transforming differences into borders."

In a famous 1935 essay, "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis," the anthropologist Gregory Bateson writes of a complementary differentiation between groups of people that can become progressive; its danger, he states, is that it "leads to a progressive unilateral distortion of the personalities of the members of both groups, which results in mutual hostility between them and must end in the breakdown of the system." This creation of differences he labels *schismogenesis*.

And it is a dynamic well-named, for cultural differences remain only differences until they are used as material to build walls. The schisms are not givens: It is we who work hard to create the cultural walls, the borders and boundaries in the various communities of which we're members. Indeed we *work very hard* at building the walls—even, ironically, when done unconsciously. Raymond McDermott and Kenneth Gospodinoff end their article "Social Contexts for Ethnic Borders and School Failure" by noting:

Hopefully, ethnic differences will survive the homogenizing influences of the modern world. We will need these differences to keep us alive to the variety of ways we potentially have available for celebrating and humanizing each other. However, when ethnic differences become a source for ethnic borders, we must attempt to overcome the conflicts; we must attempt to locate for ourselves how we are helping to create the conditions for transforming differences into borders.

Where might we as Jesuits look for help in celebrating differences and in avoiding making them into borders? We might start by considering St. Ignatius's devotion to the Trinity. We might, in fact, consider in particular the theological notion of perichoresis. While maintaining unique distinction, each of the Persons of the divine community shares in the unity of the Godhead through the eternal exchange of love and life. We who are made in the image of God might aspire to living in communities that are sacraments, so to speak, of such love and life. Indeed, "something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Martin T. Connell, S.J.  
Santa Barbara, Cal.

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